



Morning Alert - Tuesday, January 17, 2017

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HEADLINES

Morning news

NHK gave top play to a report that today marks the 22nd anniversary of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. NTV led with a report on record snowfall in many parts of Japan over the weekend. TBS reported that President-elect Trump will be sworn in as the 45th President of the United States in three days. Fuji TV reported that Lower House Speaker Oshima told reporters that the ruling and opposition parties in both chambers will begin discussions on amending laws to allow the Emperor's abdication. TV Asahi led with a report that an amount of benzene 79 times the maximum allowed was detected in groundwater at the new Toyosu fish market.

Asahi, Yomiuri, and Mainichi led with a meeting held yesterday by the four top leaders of the Upper and Lower Houses, including Upper House President Date, on how to proceed with parliamentary deliberations on legislation to allow Emperor Akihito to abdicate. Sankei's top item was an idea proposed by a group of South Korean politicians on building a comfort woman memorial on the disputed Liancourt Rocks in the Sea of Japan. The group reportedly launched a fund-raising drive yesterday.

AMBASSADOR

Ambassador Kennedy releases farewell video

Most papers took up Ambassador Kennedy's farewell video issued by the U.S. Embassy on Monday, in which she spoke about various episodes signifying her interactions with a wide range of Japanese people and diplomatic events such as the return of the Northern Training Area. She expressed her appreciation to Prime Minister Abe and other Japanese officials, and stated in conclusion: "Even

though I will be leaving, I don't have to say good-bye. I will be taking all these gifts, these lessons, and these memories home with me, and I hope to come back and visit." According to the dailies, Foreign Minister Kishida hosted a tea ceremony yesterday to bid her farewell and requested her continued support in strengthening the bilateral relations.

In a related inside-page story, Yomiuri noted that although there were some problems following her diplomatic debut in late 2013, Ambassador Kennedy has proven to be a very skilled diplomat as she capitalized on her strong bonds with President Obama to deal with such issues as the U.S. military bases in Okinawa and to realize the President's landmark visit to Hiroshima. Because many GOJ officials have relied on the Ambassador to achieve breakthroughs in dealing with various challenges for the alliance, they are reportedly lamenting her imminent departure, with one saying: "Ambassador Kennedy strongly believes that the U.S.-Japan alliance reinforces peace and stability in Asia. Her coordination ability ranks highest among the past U.S. ambassadors to Japan."

INTERNATIONAL

Abe voices hope to hold summit with incoming U.S. leader soon

Most papers reported today on a press conference in Hanoi yesterday by Prime Minister Abe, who expressed hope to meet with incoming President Trump by saying: "Once he is sworn in, I would like to meet with him and hold a U.S.-Japan summit as soon as possible."

Testimony by cabinet nominees contradicts Trump's views

All Saturday morning papers highlighted the Senate confirmation hearings for Secretary of State-designate Tillerson, Secretary of Defense-designate Mattis, and other nominees, noting that their statements on key diplomatic issues did not coincide with what President-elect Trump has said. The papers focused on remarks made by Tillerson and Mattis about highly valuing Washington's security ties with its allies in Europe and Asia, with Mainichi and Sankei saying that the two incoming officials made it clear that they will uphold the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia policy. Yomiuri said that as a result of the testimony by Tillerson and Mattis, the overall picture of the Trump administration's foreign policy is gradually beginning to emerge at last.

In a related story, Saturday morning's Asahi said optimism about the Trump administration has waned within Japan's political circle in response to the President-elect's first press conference on Wednesday, noting that Japanese politicians were disappointed that the next U.S. leader used the same extreme and provocative language as during the election campaign. The daily took up comments on Trump's performance by a number of senior LDP officials, including former Defense Minister Onodera, who said: "I suspect many Japanese people are probably getting nervous about the fact that he will soon have access to the American nuclear briefcase."

Trump's idea of imposing "border tax" not viable

Saturday's Asahi spotlighted President-elect Trump's insistence on imposing a "high border tax" on companies that relocate their assembly lines from the U.S. to Mexico or elsewhere, looking into whether it would be feasible to take such a drastic measure. The daily concluded that the proposed taxation would probably not only be deemed inappropriate by the WTO but also prompt trading partners to adopt retaliatory steps, which could end up triggering a global trade war. The daily also projected that Trump's protectionist approach will have adverse effects on U.S. employment.

In a related development, most Saturday morning papers took up press remarks on Friday by Japan Association of Corporate Executives (Keizai Doyukai) Chairman Kobayashi, in which he ridiculed Ford, Amazon, and other U.S. companies that have promised to create jobs at home in response to Trump's intimidating messages by saying that "they are wagging their tails eagerly" to please Trump. The leading businessman expressed skepticism about the sustainability of Trump's protectionist approach.

ROK top diplomat calls Busan comfort woman statue "undesirable"

All Saturday morning papers took up remarks made at the South Korean parliament on Friday by ROK Foreign Minister Yun, who commented on the installation of a comfort women statue in front of the Japanese Consulate General in Busan by saying: "The general understanding within the international community is that it is not desirable to erect any structure or memorial in front of a foreign diplomatic mission." While noting that the ROK government is not necessarily opposed to the installation of such a statue, the official also said: "It is necessary for us to use more wisdom in finding a proper location." He dismissed growing domestic calls for nullifying the comfort women accord with Japan by saying that such a step would have serious adverse effects on national interests, such as damaging foreign trust in South Korea.

In a follow-up development, all papers reported today from Seoul on a meeting held yesterday between ROK Prime Minister Hwang and a group of the ambassadors from the U.S., Japan, China, and other countries, during which they discussed diplomatic issues. The South Korean leader confirmed his government's position of respecting the comfort women pact with Tokyo in dealing with the Busan standoff. As for the "temporary recall" to Japan of Ambassador Nagamine and the Busan consul general, Sankei claimed today that the Kantei has reservations about MOFA's idea of sending them back to their posts in the near future. The paper quoted Prime Minister Abe as saying to his associates: "It is not necessary to send them back soon. The Japanese people would not accept such an idea. I won't let it happen."

Meanwhile, Saturday morning's Sankei front-paged remarks made recently by former UN Secretary General Ban, who said the ROK government should return the 1 billion yen that the Japanese government contributed to the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation if Tokyo insists on the removal of the Busan comfort woman statue. The daily speculated that this remark was simply campaign

rhetoric intended to galvanize public support, as Ban appears to be preparing to run in the presidential election planned for later this year.

Japan hopes to host trilateral summit with South Korea, China this year

Saturday morning's Sankei took up press remarks on Friday by Foreign Minister Kishida, in which he indicated that the GOJ is looking into convening a trilateral summit by Japan, China, and South Korea at an early date despite renewed friction with Seoul over the comfort women issue. The daily expressed concern that Tokyo's moves to organize a trilateral summit in the near future may send the wrong signal to Seoul that Tokyo is "not very upset" about the comfort woman statue in Busan.

Abe tries to deepen regional unity to contain China prior to Trump's inauguration

All weekend, Monday, and Tuesday morning papers reported on Prime Minister Abe's tour of the Philippines, Australia, Indonesia, and Vietnam, noting that the Japanese leader was extremely anxious to reaffirm the importance of regional solidarity in preparation for the imminent launch of the Trump administration, based on the judgment that strong ties between the U.S. and key East Asian democratic nations are imperative to holding China's growing presence in check and the new U.S. administration's Asia policy is still elusive. In his press conference in Hanoi yesterday, Abe said: "I and the other leaders agreed to continue to maintain close coordination in the belief that U.S. engagement is imperative for regional peace and stability."

During his meeting with Abe on Friday, Philippine President Duterte underscored the importance of the U.S.-Philippine alliance and said the Philippines will continue to cooperate with the U.S. Abe was reportedly encouraged by this remark since he was keen to bring the Southeast Asian nation over to the U.S.-Japan side to counter China. According to Mainichi, Philippine officials were pleased that the Japanese leader tried to play the role of mediator between Washington and Manila. However, Nikkei suspected that Duterte's remarks on cooperation with Washington could be "superficial" ones that were only made only out of deference to the Japanese dignitary.

In Sydney on Saturday, Abe and Australian Prime Minister Turnbull confirmed their policy of seeking greater coordination with the U.S. and pledged mutual efforts to effectuate the TPP. They also officially revised the bilateral ACSA. The papers said the updating of the security accord has put bilateral defense collaboration back on track after it suffered a setback when the Australian government chose France over Japan last April to develop a new submarine for the Australian navy. According to Nikkei, since the two militaries will now be able to expand their mutual cooperation in the event of a contingency that poses a threat to Japan's security, the GOJ views Australia as a "quasi-ally." Sankei said Abe was pleased with the opportunity to build personal ties with Turnbull, who has been viewed as pro-China. As for the TPP, Nikkei highlighted Abe's remarks after the summit that Japan will have to shift its focus from the TPP to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) initiative if President-elect Trump continues to dismiss the TPP.

Abe held talks with Indonesia President Joko Widodo in Jakarta on Sunday and affirmed the importance of the rule of law and peaceful settlement of disputes with China's militarization of the South China Sea in mind. Abe pledged Japan's support for Jakarta in building a stronger coast guard and developing its small island chains along the South China Sea. They also agreed to hold a bilateral foreign and defense ministerial meeting in the Indonesian capital later this year. Today's papers took up Abe's meeting with his Vietnamese counterpart Phuc on Monday, at which the two agreed to take a coordinated approach in dealing with China's militarization of the South China Sea. Abe conveyed Tokyo's plan to offer 120 billion yen to Vietnam in ODA, including 38.5 billion yen for building patrol boats intended to beef up Vietnam's Coast Guard capabilities.

Putin alarmed by possibility of U.S. military being stationed on Northern Territories

Sunday's Nikkei published a prominent inside-page article on the complete absence of progress on the Northern Territories negotiations during President Putin's visit to Japan last month, explaining that the Russian leader is strongly opposed to the reversion out of concern that Tokyo would be forced by Washington to build bases on the islands for the U.S. military. Putin is afraid that under such a scenario, the Russian Pacific fleet, including nuclear submarines, would be "contained" in the Sea of Okhotsk. Although the Japanese side has categorically dismissed the possibility of allowing U.S. troops to be stationed on the contested islets, Moscow suspects that Japan would give in to U.S. pressure.

In a related top story, Monday's Yomiuri wrote that the GOJ is considering proposing to the Russian government that in addition to the existing chartered vessel arrangement, chartered flights be allowed between Hokkaido and the Northern Territories as a means to transport Japanese citizens born on the islands, journalists, and others under the "visa-free" visit program. The GOJ is hoping to finalize this transportation arrangement as early as this spring with the goal of launching the agreed-upon "joint economic activities" on the contested islets without delay.

SECURITY

U.S., Japan sign agreement on new definition of civilian component

All papers reported today that Foreign Minister Kishida and Ambassador Kennedy signed a bilateral pact on Monday that clarifies the scope of the civilian component covered by the SOFA, explaining that employees that fall within eight newly-specified criteria, such as "civilians employed under USG funding" and "civilians aboard ships and aircraft operated by the U.S. military," are now defined as the civilian component. These people also must have "skills or knowledge obtained through advanced education" and be "essential for U.S. military operations" in order to qualify as members of the civilian component.

Although the Japanese government is not sure how many current base workers and contractors will be excluded from the civilian component as a result of the review, it is still calling the supplemental agreement to the SOFA “unprecedented.” On the other hand, Okinawa Governor Onaga expressed doubts about its effectiveness in preventing misconduct and crimes by members of the U.S. military community by saying that “it remains to be seen whether the change will directly lead to a reduction of incidents and accidents” involving civilian component members.

Okinawa governor to visit U.S.

Several papers reported today that Okinawa Governor Onaga plans to visit Washington starting on Jan. 31 with the goal of urging the incoming Trump administration to give up on the existing Futenma relocation plan.

Inada observes advanced missile defense system on Guam

All Saturday morning papers reported that Defense Minister Inada visited Guam on Friday and observed a THAAD missile defense platform at Andersen AFB, quoting her as telling the press afterward: “I was able to take a firsthand look at a potential asset for Japan’s missile defense system at a time when the threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear missiles is reaching a new stage.”

Although the minister stressed that there is currently no concrete plan for Japan to introduce a THAAD platform, the ministry plans to launch an panel headed by Senior Parliamentary Defense Minister Wakamiya to look into the feasibility of adopting a “third layer” of missile defense consisting of THAAD and “Aegis ashore” platforms. The dailies said the estimated high cost of such platforms is a major drawback of introducing them.

Ceremony held for establishment of Osprey maintenance platform in Chiba

Sunday’s Asahi took up a U.S. Pacific Command announcement that a ceremony was convened on Jan. 12 at GSDF Camp Kisarazu to commemorate the establishment of a maintenance facility for the Futenma-based MV-22 Ospreys. According to the article, engineers and technicians from Fuji Heavy Industries will conduct maintenance at the facility not only on the U.S. Ospreys but also on those to be procured by the GSDF beginning in FY2018.

Japan, UK to develop missile to be loaded on fighter jets

Monday’s Sankei led with a article claiming that Japan and the UK are expected to complete ongoing joint research this year on the development of an air-to-air missile, predicting that they will be able to develop one of the most advanced missile systems in the world to be loaded on the F-35s that the ASDF plans to introduce in the near future. The daily said a high-level political decision will be necessary for the GOJ to go ahead with the actual development, adding that the high cost of the technology could become a major problem.

POLITICS

GOJ to narrow down scope of crimes covered by conspiracy legislation

Most dailies wrote today that the Abe administration has informally decided to drastically limit the scope of crimes to be covered by a so-called “conspiracy bill” to be submitted to the Diet soon in order to win support from the junior ruling partner Komeito party. More than 350 of the originally proposed 676 types of crimes will be removed from the legislation on “preparing for terrorist acts and other crimes.”

JCP to soften its approach in order to join forces with other opposition parties

All Monday papers reported on a Japanese Communist Party convention held on Sunday for the first time in three years, noting that senior officials of the Democratic Party and two other opposition parties were invited to the convention for the first time ever. The JCP is reportedly set to take a “soft” approach by holding back its dogmatic positions on the SDF and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty so as to deepen electoral cooperation with other opposition partners with the goal of unseating the Abe administration in the next general election. The papers explained, however, that opposition solidarity will depend on whether each party is willing to compromise by not fielding their own candidates in single-seat constituencies because several opposition members are currently planning to declare their candidacy in the next Lower House race in over 200 of the 295 single-seat districts.

ECONOMY

Farm ministry to establish taskforce to promote agricultural exports

Sunday’s Sankei reported on the Agriculture Ministry’s plan to launch a 100-member taskforce to assist prefectural governments with exporting their local produce overseas by capitalizing on the growing popularity of Japanese food abroad. According to the daily, taskforce members will be dispatched to all 47 prefectures of Japan so that they can serve as liaisons between local farmers and export agents who are looking for unique products to market abroad.